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THE GENESIS OF SOME NURSERY LORE

"Mother Goose" cheek by jowl with "The Secrets of the German War Office"—certainly it looked odd. Yet, on second thought, how accurately that public library table was fulfilling its mission of general enlightenment, thus objectively reminding all and sundry that Armageddons alter only in degree after all, never in kind, even were one to count back so far as that long-past yesterday when the venerable dame of the nursery first blessed the world with her immortal couplet:—

The King of France, with twenty-thousand men
Marched up the hill, and then marched down again!

Wars pass and maps are changed resultantly, but "Mother Goose," forever the same, goes into new editions every year.

In spite of Mr. Emerson,—who devotes a casual slashing paragraph of his journal to "The unbeautiful English nursery-stories," so "childish and insignificant" when contrasted (in his mighty mind) with the fables of the Greek,—in spite of any such infrequent attack, here is a book whose glory can be dimmed no whit by slighting reference, whose fame can never be lessened by any amount of wiseacre pooh-poohing. For in just these pages lies that starting-point from which the English-speaking part of mankind began its knowledge of books. The chances are ten to one that the author of this week's "best seller," with its tale now circulating to the tens of thousands of copies, gained his first notion of fiction, at a mother's knee, from the somewhat fancifully colored narrative of the old lady who swept the cobwebs out of the sky. The poet's first pastoral, as like as not, was captioned "Little Bo Peep"; the dramatist's first tragedy waskerneled in "Ding, Dong, Bell." No, the worthy matron of the barnyard name is worth more to the race than all the treatises on submarine warfare and diplomatic scheming ever set to types—worth far more than a stack of Orange Papers and Grey Books higher than the aforementioned hill, remembered through time because of the meaningless exploit of an unnamed Frankish monarch.

Dr. Holmes in "Over the Tea Cups" makes the remark, "a fellow writes in verse when he has nothing to say and feels too

dull and silly to say it in prose." What rank heresy the average boy or girl, pouring over "Mother Goose," would dub this sentiment! They will be loyal to prose, as set before them in "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," but they will indignantly protest that the fellow who writes in verse's broken lines is quite as full of living interest as the builder of the solid paragraph.

As one goes back in thought to his childhood days he remembers how personal to himself both the rhymes and the tales were; how they seemed to create an atmosphere especially for him, in which he completely lived. And in so far as this is the fact for most of us, it may seem to approximate sacrilege to dispel illusion; many "grown-ups," as well as children, retain a lingering affection for these friends of youth. Yet naked truth compels the statement that a majority of them are far from "original" to the nursery story-book, they are all but literally as old as the hills.

"Cinderella," for instance, was written by the Frenchman Perrault, and published in 1697 together with six other stories equally famous: "Jack the Giant Killer," "Bluebeard," "Puss in Boots," "The Sleeping Beauty," "Hop o' my thumb," and "Little Red Riding Hood." Further, Perrault obtained the foundation for the lost-slipper tale away back in the sixth (Egyptian) dynasty, about 2200 B.C., when a poor but beautiful girl, Rhodopis, lived at Naucrates, in north Africa, on the shores of the Mediterranean. One day, while bathing, the wind carried off her sandal (which, by the way, was made not of glass but of a rare, soft fur) and dropped it at the feet of Psammitichus, King of Egypt, at that hour holding court in the open air. This monarch was so promptly and properly impressed with the beauty and brevity of the sandal, that he sent messengers with it throughout the neighboring countries in search of the owner. Of course it would fit no one until it was put on the foot of Rhodopis. So she was led before the king who straightway made her his wife.

Our old friend "Humpty Dumpty" has been traced back to the days of King John. "The Babes in the Wood" comes down from the fifteenth century, and is founded on fact, an old house near Wayland Wood, Norfolk, having the whole story in carvings

on a mantelpiece. "Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat, where have you been?" dates from the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and the first appearance of "Three Blind Mice" was in a Jacobean music book of 1609. "A Froggie would a-wooing go" was heard in 1650, "Little Jack Horner" and "Miss Moffit" are some hundred years earlier, while vastly older than any, "The House that Jack Built," is adapted from an ancient Chaldee hymn.

Many whose hair is now plentifully streaked with gray can still vividly recall from a picture book of their youth the laughing, quizzical face of "Old King Cole, a merry old soul,"—deservedly a great favorite. In reality, he is said to have been Cole, Coal, or Coil, a semi-mythical King of Britain who, according to Robert of Gloucester and other venerable chroniclers, succeeded to the British throne about the year 225 of our era. It was he, they say, who built the walls around the City of Colchester, which is named after him. The Roman General Constantine Chlorus engaged in a tedious war of three years to obtain possession of this stronghold and was only tempted to give up the siege when he accidentally beheld King Cole's beautiful daughter Helena. So deeply did he fall in love with her that he offered peace to the Britons on the condition that the fair princess be given him in marriage, which was done; legend further asserting that the Emperor Constantine was the fruit of this union.

Then there is that other sturdy standby of the days that are past, "Bluebeard," of Perrault's telling. It is well known that he was Giles de Retz, a Breton of infamous memory. He was really called Bluebeard as the story advises, by reason of the bluish tinge of his beard, and, indeed, fact differs little from fancy all through the man's life, the most important variance being that de Retz killed children instead of wives. Born to an inheritance which established him as the wealthiest and most powerful feudal baron in Brittany in the early fifteenth century, he began his public career fighting under Joan of Arc, and was created a marshal at twenty-five in recognition of great services. After the wars, he retired to his estates and entered on a life of such riotous extravagance as to make his patrimony melt quickly away. He then set about finding the philosopher's stone in order by its aid to recover his lost fortune; and, to placate the evil spirits whose

assistance he evoked in the search, he kidnapped and murdered about one hundred and fifty children, mixing their blood with the substance with which he experimented. It was several years before these crimes were traced to him, but when finally they were, he was arrested, tried, and executed,—still under forty years of age.

Returning to the rhymers, how many of us, big and little, still get at the lengths of the months through the lines beginning "Thirty days hath September"? These go back to the sixteenth century, when they were written by the English printer and publisher, Richard Grafton. But this is a case of simplest infancy alongside of the stanza beginning "Mother may I go out to swim?" for that is at least thirteen hundred years old; it has been traced to a jest book of the 500s. As for worthy "Mother Hubbard," some say she was of sixteenth-century parentage, others that the ballad was written by one Sarah Catharine Martin upon the housekeeper at Kitley in Devon, the seat of the Bastard family, and was dedicated to J. P. Bastard, M.P., and published in a little book of 1805's printing. It would seem by this version that its origin rests in a family joke.

A more interesting jingle, as well as one more reasonably certain as to its origin, is the quatrain:—

There was an old woman toss'd in a blanket,
Seventeen times as high as the moon;
But where she was going no mortal could tell,
For under her arm she carried a broom.

This first appeared in type in a late eighteenth-century edition of "Mother Goose," printed and published in London by John Newbery; the first of the editions in English. Now Newbery is best known in that he so often employed Oliver Goldsmith to write for him, and there is a persisting tradition that this very verse was one of perhaps several added to the volume by that lovable and genial member of the Cheshire Cheese circle whom Johnson dubbed "Pretty Poll." Forster, in his life of the author of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, mentions a circumstance in this connection. It appears that when Goldsmith's *The Good-natured Man*, was first produced, he went with some friends to dine after the play. "Nay," says Forster, "to impress his friends still more forcibly with an idea of his magnanimity, he even sang his

favorite song, which he never consented to sing but on special occasions, about an old woman tossed in a blanket 17 times as high as the moon, and was altogether very noisy and loud."

The genesis of "Mother Goose" herself is more in doubt than almost any of the tales and ditties which for so many moons have been appearing under her name. For nearly half a century, literary detectives have given this subject occasional attention, and not yet has any thrown the light of finality on the subject. Perhaps the best brief statement of the case is that the good dame was a sort of figure of speech in the French nurseries back in the days of the fourth of the land's Henris. So far as has been ascertained, the first mention of "Mother Goose" in literature is to be found in *La Muse Historique*, by Loret, dated 1650. Loret was one of the small band of rhyming gazetteers who may be regarded as the journalists of France of their period. In one of his letters are four lines of verse relating to "La Mere Oye," which, of course, is using the *y* for the *i*, distinctive of old French. These refer to the mythical personage as a familiar, in asserting that "the motive of their mirth is as a tale of 'Mother Goose' finding fables and riddles which they guess and put down." This clearly indicates that "La Mere Oye" was a well-known figure of speech at the time. The idea appears to have originated in the provinces where a "Mother Goose" tale was merely a story to amuse children. Indeed, there is a saying in French, or once was, that one told a "Mother Goose" tale when relating an incident that did not seem to square with reason and fact.

The earliest American edition of "Mother Goose" is that of one Isaiah Thomas, who, in 1785, reprinted the Newbery volume practically without change. This held the field, on this side of the Atlantic, till about 1824 (the date is stated on the title-page), when the Boston house of Monroe & Francis put on the market a genuine compendium, elaborately entitled "Mother Goose's Quarto; or Melodies Complete, some of which have recently been discovered among the manuscripts in Herculaneum, and, of course, have never before appeared in print." The last page of the book is signed Jemima Goose.

In 1833 another and larger collection was published by C. S.

Francis & Co., and the title-page bore the statement "the whole compared, revised and sanctioned by one of the annotators of the Goose family." This reference seems to have been unfortunate, in that it caused one of the descendants of a Vergoose family in Boston, many years ago, to come into the public with the statement that a relative of his was the real author of "Mother Goose," and had printed the first of the melodies as early as 1719.

Boston knows yet another story in much the same connection, and this time associated with a bona fide Goose. His name, tradition relates, was Isaac, and he married Mistress Elizabeth Foster, with whom he lived, presumably happily, in the latter half of the seventeenth and the first years of the eighteenth centuries. It was not Isaac's first marital venture, for, on her wedding day, Elizabeth had presented to her a ready-made family of ten children. To this not ungenerous beginning, six other youngsters were added as the years rolled round,—in view of which domestic situation this veritable "Mother Goose" spent naturally a deal of time in the nursery crooning songs and old ditties to her numerous brood. Later, when her oldest daughter, Elizabeth, married a printer, Thomas Fleet, and a child blessed the union, she, in her old age, spent the whole time there, making so much noise with her singing as to annoy the quiet-loving Fleet, and, in fact, the entire street. The printer, however, being a shrewd man of business, thought with reason he might commercialize the cause of annoyance and profit thereby, so he published and sold his mother-in-law's lyrics. In receiving this story it is well to note that the rhymes, as we now know them, antedate the Boston "Mother Goose" by many a year,—though why not? Elizabeth the elder must have sung what she heard in her own childhood; she was no more than the ever-useful agent in keeping alive oral tradition until monkish scribe or Boston printer (it matters not which after a century or so) could happen along to set it all to enduring paper.

After all is said and done, though, isn't trifling with "Mother Goose" like trifling with Shakespeare? It makes scant difference who did the originals, or when. What living man or woman can improve upon them?

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